

THIS STORY MAY CONTAIN LANGUAGE YOU MAY NOT WANT TO READ

UYA Story #7 – Bearito for Dinner

A bivy-sac is a lot like a burrito: a semi-waterproof shell entraps a horde of moist vegetable matter and meat.

A bivy-sac is not at all like a god-damn burrito: it is a tasteless neoprene cocoon that tightly envelops a sleeping hiker—you're not supposed to eat the f' thing.

But high in the Chiricahua Mountains of Arizona a bivy-sac is indeed a lot like a burrito. *Leave no trace* means that when I camp away from civilization I leave nothing behind in the wilderness...no garbage, no burritos, and certainly not the lower one-third of my right leg. If I am being completely honest though, and I never am quite frankly, then I should admit that I *do* leave behind piles of human dung, discretely buried for future discovery by archaeologists or aliens—whichever comes first—I am not prejudiced. While trekking through the wilderness I carefully step from rock to rock to reduce my ecological footprint and to avoid crushing-to-death some helpless lupine or ant—but I do intentionally step on centipedes, because--f' those things—they are Satan. Try lacing up leather hiking boots in the morning with an 8-inch long venomous centipede encamped in the toe box. Damn you Lucifer.

Meandering through the ponderosa pine. Picking one's way across scree and boulder fields. Clambering up stone spires and hoodoos that rise from the forest floor. One's goal is to be away from people and comfort—to eat the same damn granola day after day—to commune with nature—to suffer heat exhaustion and leg cramps from hauling gallons of water with you everywhere you go—to find yourself...pulling cholla spines out of your pant legs. Pure Zen-type bliss minus the sand rakes and lotus flowers. No cell phones. No cell signal. No other hikers.

But that's not to say that you are alone in the Chiricahua Mountains, or immune from finding evidence of past hikers. “A boot print in the sand, you son-of-a-bitch! That print won't wash away with the winter rains for another 4 months!” More than once I've sought out shade next to a boulder--only to discover that someone had been there before me for that same purpose.

Besides the rattlesnakes and centipedes, you can also expect to find historic Apache encampments, ocelots, jaguars, and cougars. I don't know why a jaguar or historic Apache would want to eat my granola, but I keep it (and everything with any kind of odor, including toothpaste and sunscreen) in a large plastic air-tight drum that I cram into my pack. I also carry a cryptic letter that says, "The treasure is buried under the tree, behind the rock, just over there." So I'll have the last laugh if I die out here alone, and some prospector finds my letter and my beef-jerkied dried-out corpse someday. If I'm lucky he'll find one of my buried piles of excrement too.

In an effort to maximize my discomfort and leave-no-trace, and minimize my sleep, I'm always on the lookout for a good smooth rock slab to sleep on. They are hard to come by in these mountains where an eruption, 27 million years ago, pock-marked all of the stone with droplets of lava that stick up like pine cones. I often find myself searching for a rock bed with my headlamp as the sun sets. "Ah, yes, this looks sufficiently painful." Then I set up my burrito—a bivy sac is a tiny lightweight one-person tent that is just barely big enough for me to lay in on my back—it's too small for me to roll over in. "Why the tiny tent," you ask? Because I've got to carry 3 gallons of water and a giant plastic food drum packed with 10 days of rations with me. Idiot (you not me).

The plastic food drum is bear-proof, and it's a requirement—there aren't many burritos laying around out here—so 5 lbs of gorp would be pretty darn tempting for a black bear. I've lived and solo trekked in grizzly country, Montana, so I've learned to take bears and state militias seriously. Tip 1: do not use the plastic drum as a pillow. Tip 2: cook dinner (ramen), clean up, and spit the residuals of my toothpaste (into a hole) at least 100-meters from my rock. Tip 3: make sure my "mystery treasure letter" is tucked inside my breast pocket. Usually this is happening in the dark (finding my sleeping rock and cooking), and more than once I have had a hard time navigating back to my sleeping rock from my bear canister. The damn bivy-sac is solid black.

I always sleep well in the Chiricahua Mountains—something about hiking 12 miles up an Arizona mountain in August with a 70 lb pack just puts me out for the night. Nothing, and I mean nothing, will wake me from my rocky sleep on such a night.

Snorting? Not going to stir me.

Scratching in the dirt? I'm still dreaming about drinking a cold beer.

Snorting closer to me? Zzzzzzzz.

Something big flipping me and my burrito over suddenly in the middle of the night? OK OK, drama queen, you've gotten my attention.

Mouthing my leg through my burrito shell while I'm strategically motionless (i.e., petrified)? Yes, yes, I'm awake!! But what the hell—I buried my toothpaste spit!

I quickly review my limited knowledge of defense strategies for being eaten:

Polar bear: fight back or stick a puffin in their mouth

Cannibals: claim you have high cholesterol in every language you know

Terror bird or velociraptor: jump into water.

Piranha: jump out of the water (but avoid the velociraptor)

Mystery animal chewing on you while trapped in burrito shell:.....damn it, I knew I should have watched fewer cartoons and studied more in college. What would He-Man or Papa Smurf do?

When you are being eaten—you think about little except how much you do not want to be eaten. I did not see my life flash before me--it was too dark. But I thought about my treasure letter still tucked inside my breast pocket, and what a shame it would be if that joke was lost to the inside of a beast. I am now angry, and I start yelling my barbaric yawps. The mauling stops. It's working! More yawping, more yawping! Something runs away in the dark (afraid of me, or not a Dead Poet's Society fan). I squirm out of my collapsed burrito, recover my headlamp, and spend the rest of the night squinting into the darkness--guarding my life and treasure letter.

In the morning I watch the sun rise from my rock bed with my shredded burrito pulled around me for warmth. I can now see that no beast is going to attack me again. I can now see my lower right leg and the 12 miles of mountain I have to cross to get out. And I can now see, next to my rock bed, laying in the dirt, the stub of a hot dog that some asshole dropped there weeks ago.

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